

Dear Judge Conley,

This is a tough letter to write. I know what I'd like to tell you but there's too much to say. I have written five letters to you and taken various parts of each to try and make this one that gives you an understanding of who I am now and how I see reality.

I've hurt a lot of people, and I want to make up for it, but life isn't that simple. The last four years have taught me that and more, and I have realized that the best thing I can do for those I victimized, my family, and myself is to realize that: "Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards." These are words I can appreciate as I look at the past four years of my life and how they've changed me. I've come to the point where I'm thankful for my arrest and happy with who I've become. I'm more mature and a better person.

As time goes on, I attribute this transformation more to my faith and the effect it's had on me. As of this moment, I am still pretty ignorant of theology but I know I am closer to Christ than I ever was before, and as this path continues it becomes magnetic. Now that I've been baptized and confirmed in the Roman Catholic Church, I know where my journey is heading, but the path hasn't always been linear.

When I was sentenced to 25 years it honestly felt like it killed my belief in God. Sitting in the SHU of Terra Haute, days after sentencing I felt lonelier than ever before, I felt completely abandoned. I cried a lot and tried to take courage. As I entered prison in Milan, I knew it was, in a way, a fresh start. I was coming to that age where I needed to decide what kind of man I wanted to be. I figured that, before coming to a conclusion on my set of beliefs, I should do some more research.

Before rejecting anything, I was going to seek out a better understanding of my "mom's religion." My first case study was C.S. Lewis's Mere Christianity which a friend had recommended. The book helped convince me that any fear I had of Christianity being illogical was, in fact, illogical.

I soon found myself more open to learning and experiencing the faith. When I found out about the Urban Ministry Institute here at the prison, I wanted to be a part of their cause, and I enrolled in their school of Christian leadership. Although much of it was initially over my head, there was plenty to gain, especially considering what little I truly knew.

During that time, there were lots of ups and downs. I attended Protestant services, and though my understanding of the Bible was expanding, my passion for it was beginning to dwindle. It seemed that those around me failed to live out what we were learning. It seemed somewhat fake. Thankfully I was able to find inspiration elsewhere in what was an unlikely place: the Muslims in my unit. They were truly devoted to what they believed. Seeing them sacrifice their comfort, whether by fasting through the day, or praying in the dawn of night, I couldn't help but wonder why my church didn't take religion so personally and with such authenticity.

When I was moved to a new unit, I soon saw a different and an attractive and authentic life being lived. I learned that most of my friends, who were truly positive influences in my life, were Catholic. This attracted me to the church, so when I was invited to my first rosary, I happily came. When we were finished I thought it a rather intimate affair, it was beautiful and peaceful and it impressed me in a way like the Muslims had.

To say that I just dove into this new faith headfirst would be only partially true. I began attending mass and a daily prayer group (the Liturgy of the Hours), but I was still hesitant. Then I read Thomas Merton's autobiography, Seven Storey Mountain. By the end of my first sitting with the text, I was equipped with a better understanding of what I'd felt but could not articulate.

There's a line in there that I keep close to my heart. He writes: "The devil is no fool. He can get people feeling about heaven the way they ought to feel about hell. He can make them fear the means of grace the way they do not fear sin. And he does so, not by light but by obscurity, not by

the realities but by shadows, not by clarity and substance but by dreams and the creatures of psychosis. And men are so poor in intellect that a few cold chills down their spine will be enough to keep them from ever finding out the truth about anything." - Those words were like a lightning bolt to me, and they helped break the barrier in my thinking and my conversion. They provided comfort as I settled into the ...- faith, something that began to feel like home. I decided to go all in and to convert. It was a process, but my decision was firm.

As I embraced Lent, I knew it was a perfect fit. As Easter approached, I became excited for the sacraments of baptism, confirmation, and the Eucharist. And before all that, the sacrament of reconciliation and admitting my sins before God and being forgiven. The experience was beautiful and cathartic and healing. I felt ready for a new day, a new life. When that day came on Easter, there was no denying the special air of the day. My Buddhist friend, who came for support, felt it. We all felt it. The memory of that day will last a lifetime.

I am committed to not squandering that grace by falling into the habits of my old, lost self. As I noted in the beginning, I'm going to keep living forward. There is a great scripture that I keep meditating on and I try to make my mantra. It's from Romans 12, where Saint Paul writes "I urge you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship. Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect." It's an every day choice that I am trying to be renewed.

That renewal goes beyond words, and goes into my prayer and my choices. For confirmation, I choose as my patron saint St. Maximilian Kolbe. I chose him for many reasons, but mostly because I want to take on the pain I've caused my victims and live a life of sanctification and sacrifice. I want my life to be an expiration. Every day I pray for my niece, my sister, my other victims, for all the victims in this world. I pray that they can overcome the hurt I've caused them, and that they can live a full life, one with healing and grace.

It's only been over the past four years that I've begun to understand the ways that my actions have affected my niece, my victims, and my family. This has come in many forms. There have been many hard and beautiful conversations with my sister and my mom about the effects of my actions. There have been many hours of prayer and convicting tears over what I've done and my desire to atone for it.

But in prison, I have also experienced what it means to be victimized, sexually. I share this not for sympathy, but so you can understand more of what I am trying to convey. An inmate who was here, but has since been released, took a sexual interest in me when I moved to my current unit. He was in his thirties and received a decent amount of respect here. When I got a book in the mail about a Christian musician, he pretended to be interested in it to befriend me.

Within a couple of weeks he tried to make a move on me, and when I turned him down, he became malicious. He told me that he was like the woman in the crime thriller Gone Girl, by Gillian Flynn (a story about a sociopathic woman who goes to great lengths to frame her husband for her own murder, even to the point of murdering someone herself). And he told me that he would go to any length - like Amy in Gone Girl - to get what he wanted from me. He said that I had to have sex with him or he'd hurt me and my future however he could. I told him to leave me alone and I prayed for protection.

A few days later when I was sleeping and my celly was at work, the inmate crept in the cell, and tightly grabbed my penis through my clothing. He then tried to force himself on me and I had to fight him off. He was aggressive and it was terrifying. Once I broke free and got him off, I was shaking. I was angry and hurt and ashamed. I wanted to kill him, but I knew that wasn't the Christian thing to do and restrained myself. Plus, in the moment and even now, I really couldn't get past the feeling that this was a bit of expiration for my niece.

There is much more to that story and how that inmate made prison life hard, very hard, for me in the months that followed. But it suffices to say: I see the effects of my sin so much clearer than I ever could have before. I understand how victims have trouble speaking up. I understand how they want to hold it in because they don't want it to become their identity. I understand how the abusers often come from a position of trust or respect, and how small and helpless that makes you feel, as you wonder whether people will believe you or them and if it's worth it to say anything. And I see how it strips you of the ability to trust other people, which really impedes relationships.

The damage of assault and abuse are not something I would wish on anyone. My actions, all assaults, are pure evil. I completely recognize it for what it is. I hate — absolutely hate — that I did what I did to my niece. And I especially hate that I promoted it to others and that I pulled my niece so close to it. My actions were repugnant and deserve to be loathed and punished.

Really, I know I deserve to be in prison. I feel terrible for how I hurt Carly. These things haunt me, and will continue to haunt me. But my victimization does not end with Carly; it extends to more people than I can name. I tragically have many victims, not that I physically assaulted but that I bullied or looked at the photos of their assaults or that I spread this toxic filth to. I hurt them all.

Though I do not know my other victims, I've read the victim impact statements, and they are a real punch in the gut. Understanding the sheer devastation in their lives, their families, and how I've fed into it is humbling. It's horrifying what they've gone through. Even though my sins were forgiven through baptism, as I grow closer to Christ they actually sting more than ever. With a renewed moral compass, I see how bad it all is and I have an even more keen sense of remorse, and it pangs me — for which I am glad. It spurs me on, it makes me pray more and it lets me never forget what I have done.

One thing in this experience that has given me so much hope is the forgiveness I've found. I never thought that, after unequivocally hurting my sister, that she'd ever forgive me. In the years between my arrest and sentencing, I thought our relationship was over. She would never forgive me, let alone love me. I am so thankful that she has. I'm overjoyed and exalted by her mercy and love. I thank the Lord our God every day for this blessing.

I know that this is disjointed, but I want to tell you a little more about what I have come to understand, not just in the mercy of God — though there is nothing greater. But in how I see and understand my sins and my crime. Towards the beginning of my incarceration I read my favorite book — Les Misérables — for the first time. It's an amazing story. What amazes me is not just how the story still resonates with me today but how, as I grow, I continue to develop a better understanding of Jean Valjean's story. Here is a man that I've gradually come to relate to and want to live like. The musical and movie are good, but it's in the book's vivid account of this man that I find as a model.

Like Valjean, I allowed myself to be overcome with bitterness. While Valjean was met with scorn and shame over his status as a convict, I was met with shame and bullying for my new, odd appearance as someone going through chemo. I had lost all my hair — even my eyebrows — lost all my youthful appearance and gained a bunch of weight. This was challenging. I tried to distract myself from unpleasant feelings through drugs, namely pornography. I continually fed into an insatiable habit, sacrificing my own health for sin. It was an escape and a prison. It ate away at my self-worth, ultimately pushing me to build up bigger walls around myself.

Without realizing it I'd begun to alienate myself from my family, becoming more self-centered. I developed a critical spirit, judgmental of those around me. Of course the reality was that I felt terrible about what I was doing (being controlled by sin) and, not really understanding how

to process those emotions, I would overreact to every imagined slight. I was a mess. And in that prison of alienation and sin, I went deeper and deeper into sin. Like Valjean, I'd created a prison of my own mind, and extended my suffering well beyond its original source.

Thankfully, we were both afforded the transformative, redemptive power of forgiveness. Valjean through the Bishop, and me through my sister. Against all odds, we were both shown compassion, love, and respect. And it taught us both in a most impactful way how these things beget each other. It's something that softened us, and helped us...open our hearts to mercy and to be transformed. And I promised to my sister—like Valjean to the Bishop—that I will be an honest man.

She has been a tremendous support through this difficult time. She is a constant source of all the essential elements that prison lacks—compassion, love, and encouragement. It is such a joy to be able to talk with her and laugh and share stories. She leaves such a great impression on my character and a model for what I want to be. Her choice to forgive was incredibly brave and has meant the world to me. Her forgiveness, her support, and her trust have magnified God's mercy for me.

I've found the way and I'm living in peace. I have everything to be thankful for. I know the sacrifice that Christ made for me, and the freedom my relationship with Him brings. I've decided to surrender my life to the Lord, and His will be done. And to paraphrase the final words of Seven Storey Mountain: "This may be the end of the letter, but not the end of the search."

After everything I've been through in life it feels as if I've climbed a mountain of my own. It's a journey I hadn't even realized I'd set out on but it's taken me so far that when I look back, I see everything so much clearer than before. I've been blessed with a new perspective—a more complete perspective. It's something I'm very thankful for.

as mentally, physically, spiritually, and socially – it's brought me to a better place. I know who I am and what my goals are and feel confident I know how and have the strength to achieve them.

This experience has challenged my thinking in many ways. I've discovered how to be a positive person. I've discovered how, although we cannot control what happens to us in life, we can always choose what we will do and feel about what life brings us. I've learned how to respond to any situation in a way that is appropriate and may offer an opportunity for growth. Suffering, for example, is meaningless in and of itself. How we choose to respond to it, however, can give the suffering meaning.

I hope that my life can be an example of this, so I can encourage others to recognize how meaningful their lives can actually be. I've learned that it's never too late to make a positive change in our lives and to never, ever give up. There is always hope, and hope starts with Him. And anything is possible through Him. Looking back over my past twenty-six years, I can see all the blessings and positivity I've received along the way. As I continue forward, I hope to share this positivity with others. As a Christian, this is my responsibility, but it is also my desire.

Judge, I'm thankful I got caught, it's been a blessing. Having my secret come out helped me own up to what I did and opened the door to new insight and understanding. And I'm glad I came to prison. It brought me to where I'd eventually be baptized. Coming here saved my life. I'm very grateful. It's a true blessing. I found Jesus, if nothing else. I hope you see me for who I've become and for who I hope to one day be.

Sincerely,  
Matthew Howard